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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9789
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RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2651
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000814

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: SYLHET ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN FULL SWING

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Geeta Pasi; reason 1.4 (b)&(d)

SUMMARY
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11. (SBU) Campaigning for the August 4 city corporation elections in Sylhet, the fifth largest city in Bangladesh, is well underway. Nearly 1.4 million Bangladeshis will go to the polls nationwide to elect local officials in the first elections under the Caretaker Government. Candidates and their supporters have adapted to the new more restrictive campaign rules. Voter awareness and interest are high. Despite a high profile, nationwide anti-corruption campaign, NGOs and election officials reported use of money to &buy votes,8 and expressed concerns about the quality of candidates.

THE MOOD IN SYLHET
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12. (SBU) During a July 26-28 pre-election assessment trip to Sylhet, a city of 500,000, we found the streets buzzing with political activity. Black and white campaign posters were hanging at main intersections. Supporters crowded homes and campaign offices of major candidates, while loudspeakers blared news of the upcoming polls. The Election Commission (EC) banned candidates from pasting posters on the walls of buildings and from holding unscheduled rallies. Candidates largely adhered to the new rules established by the EC. EC officials predicted a high voter turnout.

MONEY FOR VOTES
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13. (C) In a meeting between candidates and local officials on July 26, several individuals asked the government to clamp down on candidates who were buying votes. Officials promised action but in turn asked those making the allegations to help by refusing bribes. A local election official noted, &the use of money is a big problem in Sylhet as the poor voters are used to getting money even from the candidates they support.8 Because of the large number of Sylhetis working abroad (who send home remittances), buying votes is a regular feature of Sylheti politics. In a speech to the American Chamber of Commerce in Dhaka, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda acknowledged the difficulty of eradicating corruption in politics. The local president of the Awami League (AL) reported a rickshaw driver had been offered 4000 taka (\$59) for his vote and that of his wife. Others said the price of a vote in the slums ranged from 200 taka (\$3) to 500 taka (\$7.50). In some instances, those selling their votes provided their voter registration cards as collateral to the buyer.

THE SAME OLD FACES AGAIN
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14. (SBU) In a field of fifteen mayoral candidates, the AL-backed candidate, Mayor Badruddin Ahmed Kamran, leads the pack. Several others have either served as mayor before or

run previously. Although Kamran is in prison facing corruption charges, he remains the favorite.

CORRUPTION STILL A FACTOR

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¶5. (C) Civil society members, government officials and politicians expressed frustration over the quality of the candidates for the city polls. AL leader Shafiqul Haque lamented that his party president, Sheikh Hasina, selected Kamran as AL's favorite in spite of the Party leadership's decision to nominate an honest candidate. In his opinion, the failure to attract honest and dedicated persons to contest elections has undermined the Caretaker Government's goal of ensuring corruption-free politics. Echoing the same sentiment, Bangladesh's Chief Election Commissioner said the EC had created an atmosphere for fair polls but added, "we cannot force anyone to contest." A High Court panel recently ordered the EC to take action against candidates who filed false financial statements. However, the EC has limited capacity to review the backgrounds of candidates and the law allows for those charged but not convicted to run in municipal elections.

PARTIES: CONFUSION IN THE RANKS?

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¶6. (SBU) While AL members actively support their candidates, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) members are caught between the Dhaka leadership who have asked them to boycott the polls and local leaders who want their support. A local BNP official claimed that the BNP Secretary General asked him to

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contest the election despite the party's call for a boycott. However, the local Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) President, a BNP ally, maintained that his party would boycott elections and ask supporters to do the same.

PEACE EXPECTED AMIDST THE CHAOS

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¶7. (SBU) Most candidates and members of civil society predict peaceful and orderly elections. Authorities will set up 720 voting booths in 120 polling stations for 256,480 eligible voters. Election officials are training 2,500 polling officials and 4,000 party members on rules and procedures. The city plans a significant security presence on election day and key officials dismiss any possibility of trouble.

COMMENT

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¶8. (SBU) Our visit to Sylhet confirmed that Sylhetis*like Bangladeshis around the country*are eager to vote on August 4th. There are concerns, however, about the lack of new faces among the candidates and the continuing influence of money in politics.

Pasi